

PARTICULAR JUDGEMENT AND ETERNAL FIRE

FRANCIS THEKKEKKARA

When a soul departs the body of a person on his/her death, it is subject to a judgment - called Particular Judgment - either for eternal life or for eternal punishment or for purification in the purgatory; the Final Judgment which takes place at the end of time only confirms/reiterates what is pronounced in the Particular Judgment. This is what the eschatology of the Catholic Church says. A close perusal of the Word of God, however, points to a different path altogether. Jesus makes it clear through the parable of the 'house built on rock' that only things that are built up on the foundation of word of God would stand the test of time and those that are not would crumble down in the course of time. This essay is an attempt not to debunk the veracity of the teaching of the church but to indicate a different possibility.

In all funerals we hear in the Gospel, 'In all truth I tell you, whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgment such a person has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). That is, those who believe in God and live the word of God enter into eternal life on their death and those who do not are subject to punishment. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus vindicates this message. Again Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God, and those who hear will live" (John.5:25). That is, the time has come for those who have been punished to hear the voice of the Son of God and thereby enter the eternal life. Prior to Jesus' time such an opportunity was unavailable. Jesus continues: "Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in graves will hear his voice and will come out." (John.5:28). Through this words Jesus is referring to three categories of people. One, those who lived the word of God; two, those who hear the word of God after death; and three, those who would have to hear His voice at the Final Judgement whether one receives His word or not.

'All this shows that the Lord is well able to rescue the good from their trials, and hold the wicked for their punishment until the Day of Judgment (2Pet.2:9). "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them" (Wisdom.3:1). When angels sinned, God did not spare them; he sent them down into the underworld and consigned them to the dark abyss to be held there until the Judgment (2 Pet. 2:4). 'The angels who did not keep to the authority they had, but left their appointed sphere, He has kept in darkness in eternal bonds until the judgment of the great Day' (Jude.1:6). In all the references cited above everyone is awaiting the Day of Judgement; there is not even a word indicating that it is over. In this context Particular Judgement shall be understood as a phase in the life of soul which takes it either to life or to temporary punishment (sanctification)

Hell / Hades are a temporary arrangement for keeping the wrongdoers until the day of the last judgment; it ceases to exist after that Day. On that Day, death and hell are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev.20:14). This means that those who are in hell are expecting their judgment and not condemned in the Last Judgment. 'Death and Hades were emptied of the dead that were in them; and everyone was judged as his deeds deserved' (Rev 20:14).

Why should we pray at all for the dead if Particular Judgment subsumes the Final Judgment as well? Final Judgment is irrevocable! Suppose a person has been condemned to ten years of sanctification. If the penitential prayers of the living have caused to reduce its duration or intensity in any manner, how could one claim that earlier condemnation was final? Does the Word of God say (anywhere) that the Particular Judgment contains the Final? However, the Final Judgment takes place only at the end of Time.

Pope John Paul II in his apostolic teaching on the Holy Spirit says; "We pass through a particular phase which is after the death of the body but prior to the final resurrection. It is an interlude during which the spiritual element lives and exists after the death and decaying of the body. This spiritual element, in fact is a human personality with senses and mind but without corporal existence" (Wed. Speech 28th Oct. 1998). Is the Final Judgement has been made (over) in the Particular, this interlude is redundant.

Those who were condemned in the Particular Judgment have been in various stages according to their respective offences. When it is said that the Sea, Death and Hades released all who were in them for Judgement (Rev.20:13-14). If the Final Judgement was over, will the condemned be in one place or different places? It means that the Final Judgement is yet to come

The thesis that those who have been punished in the Particular Judgment would not be saved is, therefore, untenable. 'Thus as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses' (John 5:21). For as Wisdom 16:13 says: 'Yes, you are the one with power over life and death, bringing to the gates of Hades and back again'. 'For He both punishes and pardons; He sends people down to the depths of the underworld and draws them up from utter Destruction (Tobit 13:2). 'He brings down to Sheol and raises up' (1 Sam. 2:6). "You are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5) "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me" (Psalm. 49:15). 'The one whose work stands up to it will be given his wages; the one whose work is burnt down will suffer the loss of it, though he himself will be saved; he will be saved as someone might expect to be saved from a fire' (1 Cor. 3:14-15). This implies that those who are in the Hades are not eternally condemned but could be saved.

'And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next (Mat. 12:32). That is, certain sins would be forgiven in this Age. Certain others would be

forgiven in the coming Age. What is that Age yet to come? This Age is the Age prior to the Final Judgment. The Age, which is to come, is the Age after the Final Judgment. It is the New Heaven and New Earth mentioned in the Book of Revelations ,where there is no place for sin .Therefore ‘forgiven in the next’ means that certain sins would be forgiven at the end of this Age or in the Final Judgment .

‘In truth I tell you, on the Day of Judgment, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town (Mat. 10:15). ‘May the Lord grant him to find the Lord’s mercy on that Day’ (2Tim. 1:18). ‘ I am quite confident that One who began a good work in you will go on completing it until the Day of Jesus Christ comes’(Phil. 1:6). ‘..... so that on the Day of the Lord his spirit may be saved’(1Cor. 5:5).All these show that all those who are punished in the Particular Judgment can find solace in the Final Judgment.

‘In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming - indeed it is already here - when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live’ (John 5:25). ‘And this was why the gospel was brought to the dead as well, so that, though in their bodies they had undergone the judgment that faces all humanity, in their spirit they might enjoy the life of God’ (I Pet. 4:6). ‘Otherwise, what are people up to who have themselves baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, what is the point of being baptized on their behalf ’? (I Cor. 15:29). St. Paul is referring to baptism received by the living for their dead kins in the belief that conversion/salvation is possible even after the Particular Judgment.

In the book: Isaiah, says “I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry; for then the spirits would grow faint before me, even the souls that I have made. Because of their wicked covetousness, I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways. I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips” (57:16-18).

“And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord” (Eze.37:13,14). “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John.17:3). That is the dead will know God and thereby come to life. Therefore, Jesus Christ after his death on the cross descended into hell and proclaimed the gospel to those who were imprisoned there. ‘... and in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. They refused to believe long ago, while God patiently waited to receive them, in Noah’s time when the ark was being built’ (I Pet.3:19-20). Were it not these people who believed in his gospel whom he carried along on his ascension?. ‘He went up to the heights, took captives’ (Eph.4:8). If so those who have been convicted in the Particular Judgement had not yet been condemned in the Final Judgement.

If anybody thinks that one needs to convert himself only after death and can therefore lead a care-free and tumultuous life is deceived. The state of affairs of those punished in the particular Judgement is so pitiable, agonising and intolerable as in fire. Salvation after death is not facile as the one obtained through a virtuous-faith based life. This is because as the soul departs the body on death the person loses the opportunity to lead a life of virtue and therefore that soul has to depend solely on God's mercy which is partly contingent of the prayers and sacrifices of others.

On 13th July, 1917 Mother Mary in her apparition in Fatima (Portugal) to Lucy, Jesintha and Francisco showed the horrendous scene of Hell. On that, Lucy says: 'When the Mother opened her palm we saw a sea of fire. Devils and Souls looking like crystal - like embers of fire - were sinking in them. Others floating in the hell-fire were black and burned human forms. Devils could be recognized since they looked like unfamiliar weird animals'. The scene was so horrifying that the kids thought that they would die of fear. Then Mother Mary comforted them saying: 'you have seen the Hell where the unfortunate souls of sinners fall. It is to save these souls that God the Father wants to have in this world devotion to My Immaculate Heart. If you do what I tell you, many souls would be saved. There will be peace and World War 1st will come to an end.' (Mary Vs Lucifer, Fr. John Gallery). Two things are clear from the above: there is salvation for those who are in Hell; and peace would dawn when souls are saved! That is, souls of sinners can make calamities in the earth !!

In the heavenly visions of St. Catherine Emmerich, St. Bridget and other Saints, they saw Jesus after his death on the cross descended into Abraham's Bosom, Limbo, Hell and other places and liberated souls from there.

Even though certain Theologians do not agree that Jesus descended into hell to deliver those who subject to lifelong bondage, In the Book: Catechism of the Catholic Church, corroborate this. "This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell; that Jesus, like all men experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there" (CCC. 632).

"The gospel was preached even to the dead'. The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption" (CCC. 634).

"Christ went down into the depths of death so that 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' Jesus, 'the Author of life', by dying destroyed him who has the power of death, that is the devil, and (delivered) all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage" Henceforth the risen Christ holds "the keys of Death and Hades," so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth".

“.....He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him –He who is both God and the son of Eve... “I am your God, who for your sake have become your son ...I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, For I am the life of dead” (CCC. 635).

“..... Christ is risen from the dead! Dying, he conquered death; To the dead, he has given life” (CCC.638). This buttresses the argument that Jesus saved those who were convicted in the Particular Judgement.

In the Book: Catechism of the Catholic Church, articles 632,634 and 635 corroborate this, but 633 altogether gives a contrasting meaning. It confused me very much. It says “Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, ‘hell’ - Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek - Because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case of all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into ‘Abraham’s bosom’: ‘It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell’. Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him” (CCC633).

When the word of God say, “....through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb.2:15), It is improbable that, ‘It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.’ Were the souls in the Abraham’s bosom in darkness, shadow of death and in sorrow? Luke 16:25 says Lazarus was happy and in comforted manner. Jesus Christ after his death on the cross descended into hell and proclaimed the gospel to those who were imprisoned there and had refused to believe long ago (I Pet.3:19). Was this in Abraham’s bosom? Therefore, the statement, Jesus delivered only holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, is implausible and contradictory to the other articles and epistles.

Here I pose a question to those who do not accept the thesis that Jesus’ sojourn in hell was to liberate the damned souls. It is said in Romans 5:14 that death (satan) exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam. Does it therefore mean that all those billions of people who lived and died in sins from the time of Adam to Moses and from Moses to Jesus had been eternally condemned in their death (particular judgement) because the sacrificial sin-offering of Jesus had not yet been consummated? Does it also mean that they did not have any claim on His redemption? Those who deny the redemptive sojourn of Jesus in hell is ipso facto, denying the very redemptive missions of Jesus perse.

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John.17:3). “Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me” (John.14:6). “He will come amid flaming fire, he will impose a penalty on those who do not acknowledge God and refuse to accept the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”(2Thes.1:8). If a soul can’t hear the word of God and embrace faith posthumously, How a man who didn’t get a chance to hear about Jesus during his life, can enter into eternal life? One or the other positions would have to be taken: that is, either person would not enter into eternal life or that the word of God is wrong. Can the word of God go wrong? In order to know about Jesus one has to hear about him; in order to hear about him, He has to be proclaimed. It was for this reason that Jesus by embracing death descended into the depths of death and destroyed devil who had power over death and freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death by proclaiming the word of God to them and took them along with Him upon His ascension to heaven(John 5:25, Heb.2:15, I Pet.3:19, Eph.4:8).

Some time ago I had an opportunity to participate in the funeral service of a nun in the Malankara Catholic Church. A prayer was as follows: “Because of your mercy you bore the cross of shame and searching for us descended to the depth of abyss that devours everything . You crushed the gates, smashed the bars and freed the souls from the damning despair and chains of bondage. You saved us from the slavery of satan and brought us back to freedom and a life with you Thus you brought back your herd to adore your glory and led us from despair to hope. When we did not have the power to resist, you provided us an entry into your grace so as to beseech your benevolence. Since we have a firm refuge that give confidence we pray and make entreaties for all our parents and brothers, Both corporeal and spiritual, who have slept in true faith and hope”(Funeral of Nuns,Page30,31).The preface of the book gives an account of its pristine basis. Are they not sufficient to show that Jesus saved those who were condemned?

Is it not clear that evangelization is possible after death? If a soul can hear the word of God and embrace faith posthumously, it should be able to repent on its past sins as well; arguments to the contrary are in tenable. Can we then claim (with authenticity) that mortal sins would not be condoned after death? Act.13:39 say, “by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” “Erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands He set this aside, nailing it to the cross”(Colo.2:14). It may also be borne in mind that Judas and his followers beseeched and atoned for the sins of those who violated the first commandment (a mortal sin). Because the epistle clearly states that, the death was due to the sin that had been committed by the army. This act of Judas and his people was very good and honorable (2 Mac.12:43).

The Gospel according to St. John says, “The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son” (5:22). “And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man” (5:27). Those who believe that there are condemned souls

before Jesus Christ, have the responsibility to reveal that who has executed the judgement since the authority is Jesus, Son of Man.

“See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work”(Rev.22:12).

‘He will come amid flaming fire, he will impose a penalty on those who do not acknowledge God and refuse to accept the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Their punishment is to be lost eternally, excluded from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength on that day when he comes to be glorified among his holy ones and marveled at by all who believe in him’ (2 Thes. 1:8-10).

‘Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of man will send his angels and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and will throw them into the furnace of fire’ (Mat.13:40-42). ‘So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire’ (Mat.13:49-50). In the parable of weeds, “The slaves said to him, then do you want us to go and gather them? But he replied, No: for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”(Mat.13:28-30). From these Words of God, it is amply clear that, sinners would be eternally excluded from the presence of the Lord only on the Final Judgement.

‘But the legacy of cowards, for those who break their word or worship obscenities, for murderers and the sexually immoral, and for sorcerers, worshippers of false gods or any other sort of liars, is the second death in the burning lake of sulphur’ (Rev.21:8). ‘This burning lake is the second death; and anybody whose name could not be found written in the book of life was hurled into the burning lake’ (Rev.20:15). From this, two things are clear: people whose name could not be found written in the book of life fall not into Hell or Hades, but into the burning lake (eternal fire); and eternal punishment - the second death - occurs only in the Last Judgement.

The gospels do not say anything regarding the existence of human souls in the lake of fire. ‘When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to lead astray all the nations in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, and mobilize them for war, his armies being as many as the sands of the sea. They came swarming over the entire country and besieged the camp of the saints, which is the beloved City. But fire rained down on them from heaven and consumed them. Then the devil, who led them astray, was hurled into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet are, and their torture will not come to an end, day or night, forever and ever’(Rev.20:7-10). It may be noted that among those who were uncountable as the sands of the sea, the devil (Satan) alone is hurled into the lake of fire! Even the sinned angels were not there. Who were the Gog and Ma’gog, as numerous as the sands

of the sea? Are they sinned angels? Were they as numerous as the sands of the sea? What happened to them?

From this it is clear that the places where the wicked and sinned angels held until the Day of Judgment (2Pet.2:9, 2 Pet. 2:4), is different from the burning lake of fire. Where people whose name could not be found written in the book of life fall at the end of Age and the devil, the beast and the false prophet are.

“Lo, I will send you the prophet E-li’jah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse”(Malachi 4:5). In the book of Sirach 48:10 the same is repeated. This is an opportunity that God provides in these end times for the salvation of souls ie, to remember and pray in atonement for the ancestors. By doing so the ancestors who have died without obtaining absolutions for their iniquities will usher into salvation and the generations that hence been bearing the brunt of curses will be relieved of them.

Since eternal damnation of a soul does not take place until the second coming of Jesus, it would be possible to liberate the punished through the prayers of the living. The assertion that it is impossible to redeem those who were punished in the particular Judgement is giving in to diabolic deception, forfeiture of an opportunity to save them upsetting God’s plan

Epistles says, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy” (Roma.9:15-16). And “For Judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over Judgement” (James 2:13).

‘Therefore do not pronounce Judgement before the time, before the lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God’ (1Cor.4:5).

It is callous to leave someone lying half-dead on the wayside to his fate. Then, would it not be grievously callous to leave the condemned souls in hell in the thought that they have been condemned to eternal punishment? With the above thoughts in mind let us pray for the salvation of the hapless souls undergoing unmitigated agony in hell ever since the beginning of time, that no one shall perish, everyone to repent and His grace to triumph over justice. God bless you.